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ABSTRACT

The oldest of the mass communication technologies, books, needs to be examined in mass communication research. Accordingly a study analyzed the structure and format of the "New York Times Book Review" to identify its dual roles: evaluating books and providing information crucial to book marketing. Also explored was how the text of the book review reflected the tension between cultural responsibility and commercial necessity. Fifty-two issues of the "New York Times Book Review" published in 1990 were content analyzed. Results indicated that: (1) overall, space was allocated roughly equally between editorial content (52%) and advertising (48%); (2) two "round-up" issues ("Summer Reading" and "Christmas Books") meshed with the commercial publishing timetable; (3) 10 of the 14 best-selling books of 1990 were reviewed, and 12 of the 14 were advertised from 1 to 3 times; and (4) best-selling books received significantly more coverage in ads and on the bestseller lists than did the Editors' Choice books, and Editors' Choice books received significantly more coverage in reviews and other editorial features than did the best-selling books. Findings suggest that the text of the "New York Times Book Review," as a cultural intermediary, reflects the culture/commerce distinction that works to define new books as either legitimate culture or mass market commodities, and by associating some books with its commercial role and some with its cultural role, the text of the "New York Times Book Review" helps to maintain the artificial distinctions that separate high and popular culture. (Two tables of data and 31 notes are included.) (RS)

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BOOKS AS CULTURE/BOOKS AS COMMERCE:

AN ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT AND FORMAT OF THE *NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW*

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT AND FORMAT OF THE

NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

ABSTRACT

The book industry has historically been characterized as caught between two seemingly conflicting goals: to contribute to the cultural life of the society and to make a profit. As the most influential medium for information about books, the text of the *New York Times Book Review* reflects that conflict and marks the boundary between books as culture and books as commerce.

Introduction

The book has received little attention in the field of mass communication. The annual cumulative index of *Communication Abstracts* usually lists only a few, if any, works on the book. Most of those have to do with concentration and competition in the publishing industry or with the content of a particular genre of fiction--i.e. images of women in romance novels. Compared to the heated debates mass communication scholars have waged on any number of issues related to newspapers, television, and film, they have been curiously silent on the subject of books, the oldest of the mass communication technologies.

This study is part of a larger attempt to bring the medium of the book into mass communication research.[1] It does so in several ways. First, the study focuses on the *New*

York Times Book Review, a crucial medium for those concerned with books, and analyzes its structure and format to identify its dual roles: evaluating books and providing information crucial to book marketing. Second, the study explores how the text of the book review reflects the tension between cultural responsibility and commercial necessity that critics say characterizes the book industry. Finally, it draws on recent theoretical work in literary criticism and the sociology of culture to explore how the text of the *New York Times Book Review* reflects some taken-for-granted notions about books as culture and books as mass-market commodities.

Culture and Commerce in the Book Industry

The argument that the book industry is torn between the conflicting goals of culture and commerce has consistently shaped analyses of books and publishing. Most recently, the editors of *Publishing Books*, an edition of the Freedom Forum's *Media Studies Journal*, claim that books and publishing have come under fire "not only as a doomed medium. but as a once-great institution fallen to schlock and profit mongering."[2]

That conflict is at the heart of what is perhaps the most thorough study of book publishing in recent years. In *Books: The Culture and Commerce of Publishing*, sociologists Lewis A. Coser, Charles Kadushin, and Walter W. Powell argue that book publishing is increasingly becoming two worlds: a

world concerned with literature and serious ideas and a world dominated by the "bottom line."[3]

In contrast to the situation in the nineteenth century, there are now, Coser argues,

> two pronounced segments of the book trade: one in which books are media properties and part of a high-risk speculative mass market characterized by a winner-take-all system of huge windfalls and disastrous failures; and the rest of the industry, in which serious publishing continues albeit quietly and without much fanfare.[4]

He attributes this change, in part, to the increased size of the reading public (and by implication to its less elite makeup). Compared to the small literate population of the nineteenth century, today's higher literacy rates coupled with a population explosion have resulted in a very different group of readers.

> The potential size of the market for books is of an entirely different magnitude and has been enhanced by media tie-ins.".[5]

And "the tensions between the claims of commerce and culture . . . have become more acute and salient" since the 1960s.[6]

A historian of the American book industry, John Tebbel, laments the "Great Change" that has taken place in the past few decades:

> While publishing may never have been quite the 'profession for gentlemen' it was widely believed to be, it was a unique kind of business. Its chief ingredient was a love of the printed page, of the book. . . . If [a book] failed in the marketplace, there was some sorrow, but seldom regret for having published it.[7]

"Money and power," he argued, the key words of the eighties, have never been consistent with the character of book publishing until now. Now, "what lies between the covers hardly matters as long as it can be sold by modern marketing techniques."[8]

Such concerns, however, are virtually indistinguishable from those expressed by critics decades, and even centuries, ago. Exactly the same complaints and concerns about the degeneration of American publishing appear in the nineteenth century and in the so-called Golden Age of the 1920s and 30s.[9] Certainly critics in seventeenth and eighteenth century England had much to say about "Grub Street" and what they considered the appalling state of the book business; nineteenth century critics were extremely concerned about the reading choices of the newly literate "masses.".[10]

Since its beginning in the fifteenth century in Europe, the book industry has been a commercial enterprise governed by the same rules as any other industry. In fact, some historians claim that the book was the first mass-produced and marketed product of a fledgling capitalist economic system. In their study of the early history of the book, Febvre and Martin argue that the book has always been a commodity, produced and sold for a profit.

> The book was a piece of merchandise which men produced before anything else to earn a living, even when they were . . . scholars and humanists at the same time. Thus it was vitally necessary from the outset to find enough capital to start work and then to print only those titles that would satisfy

> a clientele, and that at a price which would withstand competition.[11]

Yet participants in and observers of the book industry have consistently characterized it as different from other industries and have taken pride in the "higher calling" of publishers. For them, the book industry is an integral part of the culture of the country, its product is not bound paper, but ideas.

At its best, in this view, publishing is an industry with a tradition of genteel poverty, an admirable reluctance to participate in the marketplace, an activity allied with the arts more than with commerce. It is this assumption that lies behind contemporary analyses of the state of the book industry. Although bound by the demands of commerce, many feel that publishers have a higher responsibility to their culture, a responsibility not shared by manufacturers of, say, toasters or doughnuts. The tension between commerce and culture, particularly in trade book publishing, has always intrigued, preoccupied, or dismayed both publishers and observers of the book industry.

The book industry, like any industry, has goals that sometimes conflict: to produce what is considered the best and to produce a profit. What is interesting about the book business (and perhaps all culture industries) is that the distinction between the two goals seems to shape and define the industry and its products. That conflict should be reflected in mass media coverage of books, especially in the

New York Times Book Review, which is a crucial source of information and evaluation of books.

The New York Times Book Review and the Book Industry

The New York Times Book Review, which reviews approximately 2,600 books a year, is widely regarded as the leading medium in the field. It and the more selective *New York Review of Books* are the "only significant national publications" devoted to regular book reviews for readers. Although general magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The New Yorker*, *Atlantic*, and *Harper's* regularly review books, as do opinion journals such as *Commonweal*, the *Nation*, *New Republic*, and *National Review*, the number of books they cover is extremely limited.[12] A few major papers have book sections--the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Chicago Tribune*, but these have little national circulation.[13]

Other specialized publications provide prepublication reviews of significant numbers of books. *Publishers Weekly*'s "Forecasts" section provides short (one or two paragraph) prepublication reviews of a wide variety of trade books, with an emphasis on books that are likely to be commercial success or make a splash in some way. *PW* has a circulation of only 30,000, but it is read by virtually everyone associated with the book industry, including booksellers. *Library Journal*, *Booklist*, and *Choice* review for librarians. These prepublication reviews are extremely important in setting the

tone for the reception of a book, but they do not reach a wide audience of general readers.[14]

In this study the *New York Times Book Review* is conceptualized as a text that is the product of many forces within the book industry and the intellectual and cultural elite. These forces include the publishers who both advertise books and submit books for review, the editorial staff who select books for review and assign reviewers, the people asked to review books, and the authors of the books. The text of the book review can be understood as a synthesis of those many activities and strategies, as a site where the many competing interests, the oppositions and differences that characterize the book world are displayed. In this sense, the *New York Times Book Review* constructs and displays the meaning and valuation of books for its readers.

The theoretical orientation of this study requires that the research object--the *New York Times Book Review*--meet several criteria. First, the book review must be seen as a cultural or intellectual authority. Hover found that the *New York Times Book Review* was tied with the *New York Review of Books* as the most-read journal of a group of 1300 intellectuals.[15] Seventy-five percent said they read the *New York Times Book Review* regularly. Coser argues that it also serves a screening function for the review editors of other newspapers and journals, who often assign books for review on the basis of a review there.[16] Editors for other book review media also look to the *NYTBR* to see what they ought

to bring to the attention of their own readers. The publicity manager of Farrar, Straus & Giroux claims that "if the *Times* gives a book a big review, I get 128 calls the next day from book review editors (and radio stations) everywhere."[17] In this sense, the *Book Review* plays a role analogous to that of the *New York Times* itself, as an agenda setter for other media.

Second, the book review must be an important factor in the commerce of the book industry. Coser writes that the publishers he studied allocated 60-80% of their advertising budgets to the *New York Times Book Review* . Dessauer lists the *New York Times Book Review*, along with the *New York Review of Books*, as one of two national advertising mediums for book.[18]

Third, the book review must have a circulation outside the literary or intellectual world and the book industry. Hover argues that of the intellectual journals she studied, only the *New York Times Book Review* had a mass circulation. According to the 1991 *Literary Market Place*,the 1990 circulation was more than a million and three quarters.

Finally, the book review must be selective. That is, its editors must choose the books they want to review from a wide range of books. Coser estimates that the review receives 15-20,000 books each year. Dessauer argues that, excluding specialized or technical titles, at best ten percent of the new books that conceivably could be of

interest to a general reading public receive some sort of review attention there.[19]

In the book world. the *New York Times Book Review* is considered the basic review medium.

> To most people in publishing--authors, editors, agents, publishers, booksellers and readers alike--if a book hasn't been reviewed in the New York Times (and especially in the Times Sunday Book Review section), it doesn't exist. By virtually unanimous agreement--even among its competitors and detractors--the New York Times is far and way the most important book review medium in the country (just as its best-seller list is far and away the most important best-seller list in the country).[20]

Through ads, bestseller lists, reviews and other editorial features, the *New York Times Book Review* plays a significant role in both the commerce and the culture of book publishing.

The goal of this study is to explore how the text of the *New York Times Book Review* reflects the tensions between the two. It will do so in two ways: first, by exploring the format of the book review to identify the content related to the culture and to the commerce of books, and second, by comparing the coverage received by two contrasting lists of books that represent opposite ends of the culture/commerce spectrum.

Research Procedures

The terms "culture" and "commerce" are central to this study and operationalized as follows:

"Culture" is synonymous with the arts and intellectual life. Books associated with culture are seen to have a value that is separate from and not related to their value as

commodities in the marketplace. The *New York Times Book Review* displays the concerns of culture by evaluating books in reviews, compiling lists of notable books, and publishing discussions of reading, writing, and publishing books as a literary or intellectual practice.

"Commerce" is synonymous with the concerns of the marketplace. Commercial books are seen to have limited value outside of their status as commodities. The *New York Times Book Review* displays the concerns of commerce by selling advertising space, compiling a weekly bestseller list, and publishing discussions of reading, writing, and publishing books as a commercial activity.

The empirical portion of this study is an examination of the contents of the 52 issues of the *New York Times Book Review* published in 1990. The examination involved several types of data collection.

The first type of data collection focused on the format of the book review. I counted the number of pages in each of the 52 issues and computed an issue average. I noted the regular features that appeared in each issue, the features that appeared occasionally (children's books, mysteries, science fiction, etc.), and the special issues that focused on a particular type of book or topic or that presented a selection of books recommended by the editors.

The second stage of data collection focused on the allocation of space to advertisements and reviews and other editorial features. Data were collected from a sample of

four issues, one selected from each three month season to produce an issue average.

The next stage of data collection was designed to explore the *New York Times Book Review*'s functions in both the culture and the commerce of the book. To compare the coverage of different kinds of books received, I designated as "culture" the fourteen books the editors of the *New York Times Book Review* selected as the best books of the year. I designated as "commerce" the fourteen best-selling books of the year. I compared the coverage--in advertising and in reviews and other editorial features--of those two groups of books.

The *NYTBR* Editors' Choice of the Best Books of 1990 appeared in the 2 December 1990 issue and consisted of fourteen titles, listed in alphabetical order:

Biting at the Grave: The Irish Hunger Strikes and the Politics of Despair. Padraig O'Malley.

The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova. Edited by Roberta Reeder, translated by Judith Hemschemeyer.

Friend of My Youth. Alice Munro.

Lawrence of Arabia: The Authorized Biography of T.E. Lawrence. Jeremy Wilson.

London Fields. Martin Amis.

My Son's Story. Nadine Gordimer.

Omeros. Derek Walcott.

Possession: A Romance. A.S. Byatt.

Rabbit at Rest. John Updike.

The Search for Modern China. Jonathan D. Spence.

Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography. Deirdre Bair.

The Things They Carried. Tim O'Brien.

Tropical Gangsters. Robert Klitgaard.

Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years. Brian Boyd.

The list of best-selling books is drawn from industry statistics as presented in a special issue of *Publishers Weekly*, 1990 Facts and Figures, dated 8 March 1991. The rankings were determined from the numbers of copies of each title shipped and billed during 1990, as reported by publishers.

Publishers Weekly compiled two lists of fifteen best-selling hardbound titles each--one for fiction, one for nonfiction. I combined the lists to determine the top fourteen titles overall.[21]

In several cases, the publisher submitted figures to *Publishers Weekly* in confidence. The editors of *Publishers Weekly* placed those books in the appropriate slot on the list but did not reveal sales figures. In compiling my own list of fifteen titles, I assigned those titles--*Lady Boss* by Jackie Collins and *Financial Self-Defense* by Charles J. Givens--sales figures that are midway between the sales of titles above and below them on the *Publishers Weekly* lists.

The Plains of Passage. Jean M. Auel. 1,686,589.

Four Past Midnight. Stephen King. 1,277,268.

The Burden of Proof. Scott Turow. 1,044,513.

Memories of Midnight. Sidney Sheldon. 1,040,217.

Message From Nam. Danielle Steele. 1,037,006.

The Bourne Ultimatum. Robert Ludlum. 679,550.

The Stand: The Complete & Uncut Edition. Stephen King. 653,828.

A Life on the Road. Charles Kuralt. 602,371.

Lady Boss. Jackie Collins. 576,175 (est.).

The Civil War. Geoffrey C. Ward with Ric Burns and Ken Burns. 560,931.

The Frugal Gourmet on Our Immigrant Ancestors: Recipes You Should Have Gotten From Your Grandmother. Jeff Smith. 535,479.

Better Homes and Gardens New Cook Book. Better Homes and Garden Editors. 527,769.

Witching Hour. Ann Rice. 498,522.

Financial Self-Defense: How to Win the Fight for Financial Freedom. Charles J. Givens. 494,338 (est).

To compare the coverage of the two lists, I examined each issue for ads, reviews, mentions of any sort of each title on both lists. I kept track of whether each title was reviewed and/or advertised, how much space it received, and whether and how often it appeared on bestseller lists or in editorial notices.

The goal of this analysis was 1) to identify the elements of the text of the book review that supported the view of books as culture and those that support the view of books as commerce, and 2) to see how the two contrasting lists of books appeared in the text.

Culture and Commerce in the New York Times Book Review

Format and Content

The 52 issues in 1990 contained a total of 2,152 pages. The smallest issue was 24 pages (23 December); the longest was 84 (2 December, the Christmas Books issue). The average was 41.4 pages. More than half -- 29-- of the 52 issues were 36, 40, or 44 pages.

The table of contents groups reviews into two categories: nonfiction and fiction or occasionally fiction and poetry. In 1990 the table of contents of the 52 issues listed featured reviews of 1,125 books[22]. Almost twice as many nonfiction books (742) were reviewed as fiction and poetry (383). The average was 14 nonfiction and 7 fiction titles per issue. In 1990, 25 poetry titles were featured.

In addition to the featured reviews, all issues contained the following departments: "In Short," usually a two-page spread of short reviews of approximately 10-12 books; "Best Sellers;" and on the same page, "And Bear in Mind," a short list (with brief descriptions) of recently reviewed books recommended by the editors; "Paperback Best Sellers;" and on the same page, "Paperbacks: New and Noteworthy", short descriptions of approximately 10 books chosen by the editors; "Letters," approximately half a page of letters from readers and authors responding to reviews;

and "Noted with Pleasure", a page of short excerpts from approximately five books.

With a few exceptions, all issues also contained one or two essays and "Children's Books," a section that reviews one or two books and lists several more.

Many issues also contained a department that features short reviews of four or five books of a particular genre of books--"Crime," Science Fiction," or "Spies and Thrillers." In 1990, crime books were featured 23 times (and were also the focus of a special section); spy books and thrillers were featured 12 times; and science fiction 7 times.

Occasionally the book review featured books about a particular subject --baseball (1 April), science (8 April) , Earth Day (23 April), football (7 October), business (28 October), environment (25 November). Sometimes the feature was related to a category of books--crime and mystery (14 October), children's books (20 May and 11 November), and paperbacks (29 April)--or to a type of publisher--university presses (23 September) and small presses (25 November).

Two special issues presented a roundup of books reviewed in the previous six-month period; the "Summer Reading" issue (10 June) and the "Christmas Books" issue (2 December).

Overall, space was allocated roughly equally between editorial content (52%) and advertising (48%). Based on a sample of four issues, the editorial hole was approximately 24 pages. Longer issues had a higher percentage of advertising.[23]

This analysis of the 1990 *New York Times Book Review* suggests that the review does indeed play important roles in both the culture and commerce of books. In its cultural role, in each issue approximately half of the space is devoted to a mix of reviews, essays, and other editorial features that evaluate books and discuss issues of literary interest. In its commercial role, approximately half of the space in each issue is devoted to advertising, primarily for books and book clubs.

The two round-up issues ("Summer Reading" and "Christmas Books") are strong evidence for the coexistence of the two roles. The issues mesh with the commercial publishing timetable -- the beginning of a new publishing season in June and the Christmas buying season -- and therefore draw heavy advertising. And in their cultural role, the editors of the book review choose and highlight for readers what they consider the best books of the past six-month period.

The special theme issues provide publishers with an opportunity to advertise books related to the theme supported by reviews and other editorial content.

The bestseller lists are also evidence of the commercial and cultural roles. The lists are presented each week as an editorial feature; they report on books that are important as commerce. Yet the editors also present -- on the same page -- books that are not bestsellers, books that are important as culture.

Comparison of Coverage of Best-Selling Books and Editors' Choice Books[24]

Ten of the fourteen best-selling books of 1990 were reviewed in the *New York Times Book Review*. Sidney Sheldon's *Memories of Midnight* was not reviewed, nor were the three how-to books, *Better Homes and Gardens New Cookbook, The Frugal Gourmet on Our Immigrant Ancestors,* and *Financial Self-Defense*. Three of those were reviewed briefly and were not listed in the table of contents -- *The Plains of Passage* and *The Civil War* in the "In Short" section and *The Bourne Ultimatum* in the genre feature "Spies and Thrillers." Together the reviews of the best-selling books totalled approximately four pages. Their length ranged from approximately one tenth of a page to one page; the average length was slightly less than half a page.

In addition to reviews, two books received other editorial attention. Scott Turow's *Burden of Proof* and Charles Kurault's *A Life on the Road* were chosen as "Notable Books of 1990" in the "Christmas Books" issues. *A Life on the Road* was listed in the "And Bear in Mind" section that accompanies the bestseller list each week, which lists the editors' recommendations of recently reviewed books that do not appear on the bestseller list.

All of the Editors' Choice books were reviewed. Together the reviews totalled approximately twenty pages. The reviews ranged in length from two-thirds of a page to two and

Table 1. Comparison of coverage of Editors' Choice and best-selling books in *NYTBR*'s editorial content.

	Editors' Choice	Bestsellers
# of titles reviewed	14	10
Total review space (pages)	20.2	4.1
Average pages/review	1.4	.45
Appearances on editors lists	38	3

Table 2. Comparison of coverage of Editors' Choice and best-selling books in *NYTBR*'s advertising space and bestseller list.

	Editors' Choice	Bestsellers
# of titles advertised	8	12
# of ads	12	22
Total ad space (pages)	7.5	20.9
# of book club ads	14	103
Appearances on bestseller list	13	218

three quarters pages; the average review was approximately one and one half pages.

In addition to the reviews, the 14 books made a total of 38 appearances in the "And Bear in Mind" section and the "Notable Books" sections in the "Christmas Books" issue and the "Summer Reading" issue.

Many of the titles on the Editors' Choice list also appeared in other editorial features: John Updike's essay (2 pages) about writing his Rabbit series, an excerpt (one and three quarters pages) from Deirdre Bair's biography of Simone de Beauvoir, short excerpts from Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and Anna Akhmatova's poetry in the "Noted with Pleasure" section, a mention of Martin Amis's *London Fields* in a "Paperbacks: New and Noteworthy" entry for a previous novel. *Rabbit at Rest* was mentioned when John Updike reviewed a book and was mentioned again in a review of a book by Judith Krantz (as contrast to Krantz's literary style). Some books were the subject of letters--Akhmatova's poetry, Boyd's biography of Nabokov, and Walcott's *Omeros*.

Advertising and Bestseller Lists

Twelve of the 14 best-selling books were advertised from one to three times for a total of 22 ads and approximately 21 pages. The *Better Homes and Gardens New Cookbook* and *Financial Self-Defense* were not advertised. Each advertised title received approximately one and three quarters pages of advertising space.

Those twelve titles also appeared 103 times in ads for book clubs, an average of nearly nine book club notices per title.

Together the fourteen best-selling titles appeared on the weekly bestseller list 218 times. The title with the most appearances was Stephen King's *The Stand* (31); the fewest *Better Homes and Gardens Cookbook* (3); the average was approximately 16 weeks.

Eight of the fourteen Editors' Choice Best Books were advertised, for a total of 12 ads and approximately seven and a half pages of space. The advertised titles received an average of slightly less than one page of space. *Biting at the Grave, The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova, Lawrence of Arabia, My Son's Story, Omeros,* and *Vladimir Nabokov* were not advertised.

Two of the Best Books appeared in book club ads. Jonathan Spence's *The Search for Modern China* appeared in ten book club ads; *Rabbit at Rest* in four.

Three of the Best Books appeared on the weekly bestseller list; *Rabbit at Rest* (8 weeks), *The Search for Modern China* (3 weeks) and A. S. Byatt's novel, *Possession* (2 weeks).

The comparison of the amount and the type of coverage received by the best-selling books and the Editors' Choice books suggests that the best-selling books are primarily associated with the commercial role of the book review and the Editors' Choice books with the cultural role. The best-

selling books received significantly more coverage in ads and on the bestseller lists than did the Editors' Choice books. Conversely the Editors' Choice books received significantly more coverage in reviews and other editorial features than did the best-selling books.

Marking Boundaries

This analysis suggests that the text of the the *New York Times Book Review* does reflect the much-discussed tension between culture and commerce that seems to structure the book industry. The editors take seriously what they see as their cultural responsibilities, which they fulfill by selecting books for review and publishing a list of their choices as best books. At the same time they cannot ignore the importance of the commercial concerns of the industry. Most of the bestsellers were reviewed, although they were given little space. In addition, the bestseller list and the book advertising are significant factors in the commerce of the book industry.

Sometimes those roles conflict. The editor of the review from 1983 to 1989, Mitchel Levitas, said in an interview with *Publishers Weekly*,

> We have a policy of reviewing every bestseller--Danielle Steel, Harold Robbins, Andrew Greeley, Stephen King. Even though the *Book Review* is on the whole more literary, we believe our readers want to know about the bestsellers as well.[25] ("Talk with Mitchell Levitas" 1984, 18).

Then deputy editor, now editor of the *NYTBR*, Rebecca Sinkler, told another *Publishers Weekly* interviewer,

> I know there are certain mandates to do the mass-appeal books, but there are an awful lot of intelligent editors who feel an obligation--a pleasant obligation--to express their own tastes and set some standards.[26]

While the book review is "on the whole more literary" and the editors want to "set some standards," the "policies" and "mandates" force them to pay attention to books that might be popular but are not considered serious contributions to culture.

So the editors of the book review seem to be in a bind. The text must uphold the standards of literary culture at the same time as it fulfills its commercial obligations. One way to manage that bind is to maintain strict boundaries between the two roles. As the above analysis suggests, best-selling books appear more prominently in the *NYTBR*'s commercial role (in ads, the bestseller list) and less prominently in its cultural role (in reviews, essays, and selections of best books). Conversely, the Editors' Choice books appear more prominently in the *NYTBR's* cultural role and less prominently in its commercial role.[27]

In recent years, sociologists of culture and literary critics have argued that the supposed conflict between culture and commerce masks important assumptions about cultural value.[28] Bourdieu argues that labeling some work commercial and some non-commercial (or art), a dichotomy that characterizes so much discussion of books and publishing, is an important strategy for marking the differences between high and popular culture. For cultural products -- books in

this case -- to be seen as such they must be distinguished from commerce.

> The opposition between the "commercial" and the "non-commercial" appears everywhere. It is the generative principle of most of the judgments which, in the theatre, cinema, painting, or literature, claim to establish the frontier between what is and is not art.[29]

Popular books, commercial books--those most likely to be on the bestseller list--serve an important function in the *New York Times Book Review*. They define, by opposition, the new books that may be considered high culture, or at least serious books.

Although literary criticism traditionally maintains a strict distinction between a work's aesthetic value and its commodity value, the market economy and the economy of literary or cultural value cannot be separated.

> The traditional--idealist, humanist, genteel--tendency to isolate or protect certain aspects of life and culture, among them works of art and literature, from consideration in economic terms has had the effect of mystifying the nature--or more accurately, the dynamics of their value.[30]

Because aesthetic value has traditionally been defined by its opposition to utilitarian value or market value, maintenance of the boundary between the two is crucial. The text of the *New York Times Book Review* repeatedly marks that boundary by drawing attention to the market value of best-selling books -- on the bestseller list and in ads -- and the aesthetic or cultural value of the Editors' Choice books --in reviews and in lists of suggested reading.

The opposition between cultural or aesthetic value and commercial or economic value is the key to understanding the high/low, elite/popular distinctions that characterize our understanding of culture. Stuart Hall writes that the structuring principle here is "the tensions and oppositions between what belongs to the central domain of elite or dominant culture and the culture of the periphery." The precise contents of each category change, but the distinctions between them remain. What needs investigation then are the "forces and relations which sustain the distinction: the difference, roughly, between what, at any time, counts as an elite cultural activity or form and what does not."[31]

This study suggests that the text of the *New York Times Book Review*, as a cultural intermediary, reflects the culture/commerce distinction that works to define new books as either legitimate culture or mass market commodities. By associating some books with its commercial role and some with its cultural role, the text of the *New York Times Book Review* helps to maintain the artificial distinctions that separate high and popular culture.

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[1] This paper is drawn from "Defining the Book: Culture and Commerce in the New York Times Book Review," Unpublished dissertation, University of Iowa, 1992.

[2] Freedom Forum Media Studies Center, "Publishing Books," *Media Studies Journal* (1992):x.

[3] Lewis Coser, Charles Kadushin, and Walter W. Powell, *Books: The Culture and Commerce of Publishing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

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[4] Coser, *Books*, 41.

[5] Coser, *Books*, 41.

[6] Coser, *Books*, 7.

[7] John Tebbel, *Between the Covers: The Rise and Transformation of American Publishing* (New York: Oxford University Press), 462.

[8] Tebbel, *Between the Covers*, 464.

[9] Coser, *Books*, 17-20.

[10] Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957); Leo Lowenthal, *Literature Popular Culture, and Society*, 1961, (Palo Alto: Pacific Books, 1968).

[11] Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing 1450-1800*, Trans. David Gerard, (London: New Left Books, 1976), 109.

[12] John Dessauer, *Book Publishing: A Basic Introduction* (New York: Continuum, 1990), 162.

[13] Coser, *Books*, 324.

[14] Coser, *Books*, 315-316.

[15] Julie Hover and Charles Kadushin, "Influential Intellectual Journals: A Very Private Club," *Change* 41 (March 1972): 39-47.

[16] Coser, *Books*, 317.

[17] David Shaw, "Fear, Power of N.Y. Times Book Review," *Los Angeles Times*, 11 December 1985: Part V 1+.

[18] Coser, *Books*, 324; Dessauer, *Book Publishing*, 166.

[19] Coser, *Books*, 317; Dessauer, *Book Publishing*, 162.

[20] Shaw, *Fear, Power*, 1.

[21] I decided to follow the publishing industry practice and not include paperbacks in my own list of best-selling

titles. According to the same *Publishers Weekly* issue, twenty-eight mass market paperbacks had in-print figures of two million copies or more ("Earth Day, Comics & Reprints Out Front" 1991). Had I included paperbacks, my list of best-selling titles would have been composed entirely of mass market paperbacks, mostly reprints. Since the editorial focus of the *New York Times Book Review* is almost entirely on new titles, a bestseller list composed only of mass market paperbacks would have made analysis difficult.

22 The short reviews that appear in the "In Brief" feature, the children's books section, the paperbacks section, and the genre feature are not listed in the table of contents.

23 One issue was chosen from each three-month period: 18 February, 40 pages, 63% editorial; 6 May, 44 pages, 54% editorial; 16 September, 44 pages, 53% editorial; 18 November, 56 pages, 42% editorial.

24 See Tables 1 and 2.

25 "Talk with Mitchel Levitas," *Publishers Weekly*, 2 March 1984: 18+.

26 Howard Eisenberg, "So Many Books, So Little Space," *Publishers Weekly*, 10 April 1987: 25-30.

27 In the larger study from which this paper is drawn, I explore the language used to describe the best-selling books and the Editors' Choice books. The best-selling books are consistently described in terms of their commodity status. For example, the review of Danielle Steel's *Message from Nam* explained its popularity as the "sheer power of marketing" and the review of Stephen King's *Four Past Midnight* includes references to "figures on his royalty checks."

28 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984); Pierre Bourdieu, "The Production of Belief: Contributions to an economy of symbolic goods," in *Media, Culture and Society: A Critical Reader* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1986); Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Contingencies of Value," Critical Inquiry 10 (September 1983): 1-35; Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

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[29] Bourdieu, "Production of Belief," 138.

[30] Smith,"Contingencies of Value," 13.

[31] Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the popular,'" in *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 227-240.